

## Notes for a speech on Alliance motion 19 February 2002

### *OTR Issue*

We had thought that the Alliance Party was committed to conflict resolution – this motion appears to demonstrate that they haven't the first idea of its basic principles.

The only justification for trying to resolve a conflict by negotiation and mediation – rather than treating it just as a law and order issue – is the recognition that there was wrong and fault on all sides. In our conflict the "sides" were not just loyalist and republican paramilitaries; the forces and institutions of the State were also directly involved as combatants. Yet the Alliance motion demands that elements of one side – those who, for one reason or another, are at threat of prosecution – surrender to an element of another side – the courts – admit their guilt, be sentenced and then released at the pleasure of their erstwhile opponents.

It is pure fantasy to suppose that that will ever happen. But even to demand it is contrary to the concept of conflict resolution. We believe that those who took up the gun and the bomb and killed their fellow citizens were totally wrong, whatever their motives. Presumably Alliance agree with that. We also believe, however, that those who used the State as a weapon of discrimination, intimidation and repression, who subverted our civil liberties, turned the courts into a conviction machine, condoned torture and summary execution were also wrong, whatever their motives. Presumably Alliance don't believe that.

They seem to believe that the court system has survived thirty years of being used as a weapon of war to still represent some abstract concept of justice. That is not just naïve, it is a highly partisan view of the character of the conflict we have all endured. We prefer practical justice – the justice that comes from resolving conflict; not just ending violence but ending the causes of violence. To do that means working together with all those who commit themselves to peace, including those who may, during the past conflict, have escaped from gaol or committed a violent act.

That is why the proposals on the "OTRs" are fully in line with the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. That was a solemn obligation to work together for peace and the creation of a just society. The abandonment of acts of violence or coercion, legal or illegal, is a necessary part of that process. At the same time, we recognise the importance of the need for truth and accountability. Let us have a serious debate another time about the pros and cons of some kind of Truth Commission. But let us not think that it is any kind of contribution to peace to demand a one-sided admission of guilt as the price to pay for joining in the construction of a new society.

### *Exiles issue*

This motion gets worse by arbitrarily linking the OTR issue to that of people who have been forced to leave Northern Ireland by violent threats. If there is one thing we have learned over the past number of years it is that to link progress in one element of the peace process to progress in another simply leads to both being held back. Yet here we have proposed a new linkage, another set of chains designed actually to slow the peace process not advance it.

[REDACTED]

This is the most irresponsible kind of politics – to make demands that you know will never be met, to make ringing rhetorical denunciations that warm only your own self-esteem and then retire into the cosy glow of self-righteous satisfaction. Alliance have proved themselves very good at that kind of politics.

We prefer a more practical, more effective and less patronising kind of politics. We look reality in the eye and try to make it better. Let's look at how we might make the reality of those exiled better. Because, the only linkage we accept is that, just like the OTRs, those exiled by paramilitary threat have the full right to participate in the creation of a peaceful and just society. At the same time, no organisation has the right to threaten and intimidate people, whatever their alleged offences. These threats and the practice of torture through beatings and shootings to back them up are contrary to every concept of human rights and are a vivid stain on the honour of republicanism and loyalism. We are unequivocal in our condemnation of these actions and we demand that they stop now.

That is not the end of the story, however, and we do not believe it is enough just to condemn and demand. For the sad reality is that many – not all but many – of those who have been exiled have admittedly been involved in anti-social, criminal activity. That is in no sense justification for threats – all it means is that we must take extra care – produce the resources and give practical assistance to local communities - in reintegrating them into society.

This is not a simple matter. The only organisation that protects those under threat is the NIACRO Base 2 Project, which is on the Westminister Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Its 2000 report showed that 854 people had been referred as being under threat. 654 were found not to be under threat. Almost 200 were the result of that year. Another 200 were the result of other internal sectarian intimidation. The rest were alleged to have, a result of in anti-social behaviour and criminality of various kinds offences. 45 people were forced to leave Northern Ireland the previous year.

It would be irresponsible to insist that all these people belong to the community. For one thing, even if paramilitary threat should be eliminated, they might still be at risk from other elements. They have to reckon with the reality of the diversity of paramilitary groups. At least 5 separate organisations on the republican side that have carried out punishments and the splintering on the loyalist side is obvious. Many of these groups have no commitment to the peace process and would like to pose as "defenders" of their communities.

The responsible thing to do is to create good inter-agency working and good links with the communities involved in order to assist those exiled under threat to reintegrate and live peacefully with their neighbours. Another NIACRO scheme, the Community Reintegration Project is trying to do just that and has helped over 100 young exiles resettle in society over the past year.

So, instead of rhetoric, let's have core support for schemes such as these, let's have the responsible agencies commit to working together, let's work to reduce the scourge of anti-social crime in our neighbourhoods. Let's stop playing the politics of righteous indignation and achieve some practical justice. Reject this motion.

Althiana party  
claimed in the press  
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[REDACTED]

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This is not a simple matter. The only organisation that provides reliable statistics on those under threat is the NIACRO Base 2 Project, which gave evidence last year to the Westminster Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Its latest Annual Report for 2000 showed that 854 people had been referred as being under threat. 174 of those were found not to be under threat. Almost 200 were the result of the UVF/UDA feud of that year. Another 200 were the result of other internal conflicts, family feuds or sectarian intimidation. The rest were alleged to have, and rarely denied, involvement in anti-social behaviour and criminality of various kinds, including drugs and sex offences. 45 people were forced to leave Northern Ireland, a significant reduction on the previous year.

It would be irresponsible to insist that all these people return immediately to their community. For one thing, even if paramilitary threats were withdrawn, as they should be, they might still be at risk from other elements in the community. We also have to reckon with the reality of the diversity of paramilitary organisations. There are at least 5 separate organisations on the republican side that have carried out violent punishments and the splintering on the loyalist side is obvious. Many of these groups have no commitment to the peace process and would like to pose as "defenders" of their communities.

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